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ABSTRACT

While youth and the world have changed greatly, most high schools have changed only slightly. School programs and settings can be opened, individualized, and dispersed, but still provide a sense of community, by adopting open education and open space. Perhaps the best known example of open education is Chicago's Metro High School: the city is its curriculum; the community is its learning laboratory; and its lesson is freedom, choice, and responsibility. Open space schools are designed to allow evolution in educational philosophy and to accommodate the vast variety of instruction relevant to present and future world conditions. However, teachers and principals must begin to consider open space in terms of the potential manipulation of many subspaces, a manipulation directed by innovative learning activities. Flexible design alone cannot guarantee flexible use. (Author/MLF)

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THE RATIONALE BEHIND OPEN SPACE EDUCATION

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In 1959 Dr. James B. Conant published the findings of his nation-wide study entitled "The American High School Today." And although the report included 21 recommendations for improvement, it concluded that ". . . American secondary education can be made satisfactory without any radical changes in the basic pattern."

Nearly two decades later there have been at least five major studies of secondary education all of which called for sweeping reforms and radical alterations. These investigations were conducted by such organizations as the Kettering Commission, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the President's Science Advisory Committee, the U.S. Office of Education, and a partnership of the Educational Facilities Laboratories and the Institute for the Development of Educational Activities. All five reports were extremely critical of the American high school today.

If you were to page through these studies, you would find statements like "formal schooling is doing nothing for a large part of the young population 15 through 20," or "major problems exist in our secondary schools as a consequence of changing patterns of adolescent growth and development," or "though youth is no longer the same, and the world is no longer the same, high schools are essentially unchanged from what they were at the beginning of the century." Throughout these reports, the central theme appears to be that we have badly mis-read the youth of today. We have continued to think of them as we were thought of, and to teach them as we were taught. The fact is, the youth are not as young

EA 008 001

as they used to be.

We all know that pubescence, the period of biological change, is universal. But we are not certain whether adolescence is a universal, natural stage or whether it is culturally determined. Some educators, in fact, believe it is actually an invention of western industrial society. In any event, beyond becoming biologically mature at an earlier age, the youth of today are also introduced to more information and more varied experience at an earlier age. Consequently, they do more, see more, and know more than any other generation in history.

Meanwhile, back at the local high school, the "establishment" is apparently unconcerned with these discontinuities and is proceeding with "education" as usual. Though many high schools may look different from those of our own days, they are basically no different. The typical high school today still provides little real choice as to what students shall study, or when, where and how they may do so. And it is the only institution in America, except prisons, where they count bodies seven times each day to guarantee that no one has escaped.

This, then, is the situation which confronts us: while youth and the world have changed greatly, most high schools have changed only slightly. Therefore, the youth live in two, dramatically different worlds: the one outside schoolhouse walls, where they exercise a vast amount of self-determination, and the world inside high school walls, where virtually every phase of their lives is dictated.

In the fifties and sixties, we paid too much attention to the organizational aspects of the institution cal. ' the high school, and not nearly enough attention to the doubts and fears, and the motivations and problems of young people, the so-called "affective domain." That domain, which embraces the attitudes of young people toward the phenomena

in the world around them, toward each other, toward adults, and most important, toward themselves, probably has more to do with the way students behave than the "cognitive domain" and is, therefore, at least as important. But because it is harder to define, harder to do something about in school, we typically do not program our schools to pay serious attention to it.

Given the earlier growth of adolescents, how can our high schools be "dejuvenilized?" How can school programs and settings be opened, individualized and dispersed, but still provide a sense of community? How can their apparent counter-productivity be reversed? In my judgment, the solution consists of "open education" and "open space." This emphasis on "openness" is simply an expression of some of us and of most youth to be opened up to, and helped to become more aware of the incredible vistas and possibilities of life. Surely, high schools should be able to nurture an understanding and appreciation for the dimensions of life as it is, as it has been, and as it might conceivably be!

Open Education

But what exactly are open education and open space, and how can they be expected to bring about the results I have just described? Although we have some excellent examples of open education at the high school level here in Wisconsin, such as the Malcolm Shabazz School in in Madison and Walden III in Racine, perhaps the best known examples in America today are the Philadelphia Parkway Program and the Chicago Public High School for Metropolitan Studies.

The Chicago Public High School for Metropolitan Studies, Metro High, is an experimental four year "high school without walls." As a result of a kind of natural progression, it is now considered an alternative to traditional secondary education in Chicago.

The major concept behind Metro High is that it is a "community of learners" in which education can occur in real-life situations, where a student with the help of a skilled teacher can learn from people with varied talents and interests - from businessmen, lawyers, electricians, artists, and newspaper reporters.

Most classes meet in space donated by institutions - the cafeteria of the Prudential Building, the Museum of Contemporary Art, the Illinois Bell Telephone Company or the Adler Planetarium. There are five class periods on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, and four periods on Tuesday and Thursday, but as much as 30 minutes' travel time between.

The learning units taught at Metro include the traditional subjects, but the majority is in areas not usually covered in a typical high school curriculum. Exemplifying the school without walls concept, there are regularly scheduled courses taught by businessmen, librarians, curators and other volunteers. As such, students can be found studying marine life at Shedd Aquarium, writing for a large magazine under the guidance of a staff writer, broadcasting at one of Chicago's major radio stations, or acting with a professional theatrical group at Second City.

Every Metro student is required to enroll in the "concentrated experience" program, which allows him or her to do intensive work in an area of interest. Each staff member is responsible for teaching one concentrated experience. Some projects currently being developed are a recycling center, flying instruction, newspaper production, videotaping, and working in politics. Each one of these learning units fulfills requirements for graduation in a major subject or in an elective. Metro High School satisfies all State requirements; its fulltime staff has Board of Education certification; and both are accredited by the North Central Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools.

The school year is divided into four ten-week learning cycles. At the end of each cycle, the students meet with each of their instructors, who make a detailed evaluation of their work. Teachers and students decide if "credit" or "no credit" should be given for the preceeding ten weeks. Though there are no grades and no class ranking at Metro, each student must have credit in order to receive points for graduation.

Metro is the only school in Chicago that allows students to take an active role in its administration. The school functions in part through four standing committees: Curriculum, Staff Selection, Student Selection and Evaluation. Students are invited and expected to participate actively in committee meetings and procedures. For Chicago's Metro High School, the city is its curriculum; the community is its learning laboratory; and its lesson is freedom, choice, and responsibility.

American education faces no greater challenge than the necessity of planning effectively for the future. Considering the fact that the children of today will be spending half of their lives in the 21st Century, the challenge of preparing them for a life that does not yet exist and whose nature can only be imagined is an awesome task indeed. It is imperative, therefore, that we educators recognize the rapidly changing technological society which public education must be geared to serve and take appropriate steps to guarantee its success.

In the past such concepts as "teacher," "class," "curriculum," and "school" each had a nearly universally accepted meaning. Everbody knew what a teacher did, what the "ideal" class size was, what the curriculum consisted of and what a schoolhouse was like. And these convenient definitions saved a lot of troublesome thinking, because in concert they served to answer a lot of troublesome questions about how to "do" education. School districts simply constructed a program out of

these basic concepts, bringing teachers together with uniform-sized groups of students of similar ages, supplying them with textbooks, dividing the school day into standard blocks of time, and deploying people and resources throughout an "eggcrate" school building.

Today, however, in some high schools, school personnel are starting with the individual pupil and with many different programs. On the premise that no one program is necessarily appropriate for everyone, they are attempting to meet each student where he or she is and adapt a combination of programs to special needs.

Open Space

As we all know, the old educational order is beginning to change and, with that change, educators are beginning to recognize the need for more flexible school facilities that will both permit and promote these newer kinds of educational programs and practices. Such schools are designed to allow evolution in educational philosophy and to accommodate the vast variety of instruction they will be required to support well into the 21st Century.

The "open space" concept offers the kind of flexibility necessary to sustain the re-structuring of education which has already begun. The major architectural feature of open space schools is the absence of load-bearing interior walls. The roof is supported by the exterior walls and the inner space is virtually open and usable.

Admittedly, not everyone connected with open space schools now in operation would agree with my assessment of their desirability. Many teachers and administrators have had shattering experiences, attempting to function in this new environment. The major criticisms of these open space schools, running the gamut from too much noise and visual distraction to too much static electricity in the carpeting, though valid in

some cases, are not only quite capable of remedy but generally indicative of more serious problems. The real crux is the lack of proper planning and training.

So not all open space schools have been successes; in fact, some have been disasters. These mixed experiences are clear evidence of the need for a better understanding of the open concept and the elements necessary for effective implementation. Teachers and principals, as well as superintendents and school board members, must begin to consider open space in terms of the potential manipulation of many subspaces, a manipulation dictated by innovative learning activities. Flexible design alone cannot guarantee flexible use!

When open space schools lack precise definition, it is natural for teachers and students to seek the perimeters and corners. Everyone wants some personal territory and teachers, in many instances, seem to want the kind of security afforded by the traditional classroom. This "psycho-spatial" reaction, however, subverts the underlying purpose of the open space concept. The key aim of open space schools is to create an environment which enables greater interaction between teacher and student, between teacher and teacher, and between student and student. This kind of rich interaction, however, cannot take place if teachers are going to attempt to approximate traditional classrooms by staking out a claim on an exterior wall, lining up chairs or desks in neat rows, and enclosing them with tack and chalkboards.

But how can the natural, human desire for a comfortable sense of enclosure be reconciled with the alleged advantages of the open space concept? First, we must recognize that this desire is real and nearly universal. The so-called "territorial imperative" is a much-researched psychological phenomenon. Second, we must devise strategies for taking

account of this condition without forfeiting the potential of the open space concept. Open space, therefore, must be considered as negotiable. Its elastic properties invite choice and variety, including degrees of enclosure. And negotiable spatial variations are the very hallmark of the open space concept.

But what about teaching? First, because learning should be predicated primarily on the individual student's abilities, motivations and interests, and take place at the student's own pace, and because of the increasing use of technology (electrified study carrels and computer managed instruction), the teacher's role will be dramatically changed. Second, there may be fewer certified teachers, because of a de-emphasis of certification per se and a greater utilization of teacher aides, interns, and outside professionals. Probably as much as fifty per cent of what teachers do today will be abandoned during the next decade.

Teachers will be freed from many of their so-called housekeeping chores and will become educational "managers." It will be their responsibility to manage the individual learning process for each student in their group and to oversee the ancillary activities of the paraprofessionals in their charge.

Instead of the rigid demonstration and lecture procedures of the past (and the present in too many cases), teaching teams will be arranging, along with student seminars, electronic presentations and "hands-on" experiments, a whole array of experiences in the local community and beyond.

Summary

An important recent trend in public education has been the overall reduction of many kinds of territorial imperatives - grade, subject, and function. These provincial prerogatives belong to the past, and the

more progressive interdisciplinary approaches as well as non-grading, core curriculum, and team and volunteer teaching are gaining acceptance. Any reversal of this trend, such as the "back to basics" mentality, would be counter-productive educationally and tend to negate or, at the very least, neutralize the promising "rationale behind open space education." Students and the world have changed, therefore, so must the American high school.